

Self-Care Starter Kit

3 Key Strategies for Improved Movement and Health



Introduction

When I was growing up, I was influenced hugely by my mother (I'm sure you can relate). She was (and still is, thankfully) a force of nature, and I truly don't remember time spent sitting down with her, other than when we were eating. She was self-employed and worked all the hours under the sun, as well as dealing with ponies, a various menagerie of animals at home, driving my sister and I to various clubs, tending the garden, cooking, walking the dogs. I don't think she sat down for the good part of 15 years! A very strong memory is of me, as a teenager, sitting down on the couch and feeling horribly guilty as mum was once again completing some project/chore and bustling around me.

Why am I telling you this? Well, I think for a lot of us we have been conditioned to believe that rest or self-care is an indulgent and unnecessary pastime. It is a concept that has only come into our conscious in the last couple of decades, but I believe that us, the people of the equestrian industry still struggle with the notion that we need to actively take care of our own being. Strength, endless work, busyness and dealing with horses all means that spending time on ourselves would be considered a weakness that is reserved for people who are a bit 'soft'.

Well, it's time the narrative changed. The truth is we can only stay strong and purposeful and intentional and busy if we put some check points in place for our bodies. I love and respect the push through mentality, and at times that's exactly the mindset we need but we also need to know when to not wear it as a badge of honour, and instead honour what we really need.

This self-care starter bundle is really an invitation to you, to dip a toe in the waters of acknowledging the body you are in and taking just 3 simple steps to giving it a chance to serve you better. I know you are busy. I know carving time out of your day is difficult. I know you want to ride better. I know there are days when you would love a bit more energy. And this is why these 3 steps don't require a gym membership and they don't require hours of your time. All they require is a commitment to them happening every single day, and I promise you, the rewards will be well worth the effort.

1.The Principles of Alignment

‘It is not possible to sit with great posture and positioning on your horse, if you don’t stand and walk with the same’

Head, Shoulders, (Pelvis), Knees and Toes

Watch someone walking and it will give you a pretty accurate preview as to how they will ride. Next time you are at a horse show, take a moment to watch the way people move around. It will soon become quite clear that everyone has a slightly personalized way of travelling; are they leaning forward with their upper body? is their bottom sticking out the back? where do their toes point? how long is their stride? It is not impossible to imagine that these movement habits will have an effect on the way someone sits in the saddle.

Habitual patterns of movement and misalignments (however small they may seem) set up a cycle of restriction and an imbalance of load across joints, which causes weakness and instability. This manifests as pain and an inability to handle the forces caused by general movement, let alone those created when the body is in the saddle.

We seem to get away for a long time with a lot of these habits, but there will come a time where pain becomes debilitating and the loss of mobility restricts our quality of life.

What is brilliant about being a rider is that if we pay close enough attention, the positional faults you may display in the saddle can be a tap on the shoulder; a messaging service to alert you to how your body is currently operating. Let’s face it, no-one will instruct you on how to walk better, but there’s plenty of people ready to tell you how your body parts should be looking when you are riding. The message here is to use this information to guide you in how to move your body off-horse, because if you wait to be corrected only when you are in the saddle, the odds of any correction becoming more than just a temporary contortion are very slim.

From the Ground Up

To build a tower, you need to stack blocks squarely on top of each other for maintenance of form, stability and integrity over time. By applying the same principles to the human body, which is a tower in its own right, we set the scene for a strong, stable structure with maximum mobility.

The Biomechanics of the human body are complex, but it is possible to learn some alignment principles that when implemented regularly, will start to reshape any sticky spots.

Any animal or machine that relies on forward movement benefits enormously from having all structures pointing the same way, ie in the direction of travel.

- **FEET:** This starts with the feet; they should be pointing straight ahead.
- **KNEES:** Their neighbours, your knees are designed to move you fluidly over the ground. Do they look like load bearers? No, no they don't so they really shouldn't be used as such. Knees are for movement, not for load, so bending yourself in half and leaning over them to get yourself around quicker is not only a tripping hazard but a short track way to needing a new knee.
- **HIPS:** Next up comes those mighty hips; the largest joint in the body and therefore the ones designed to take the most load. These have a large amount of movement ability too; yes they are the overachievers of the body, so let them do their job.

KEY ALIGNMENT PRINCIPLE; Your hips should be directly over your heels.

Stacking your hips over your heels takes the load off the vulnerable knees, keeps your balance upright and allows the hips to move correctly.

- **RIBS:** As we move up the body, the next major structural portion is your ribcage. It should be remembered that your ribs are attached to the mid-section of your spine, so wherever they go, your spine goes too. To maintain the correct curvature, and therefore keep the right amount of loading and space between the vertebrae, your ribcage needs to be stacked on top of your hips, which are on top of your heels.

KEY ALIGNMENT PRINCIPLE: Stack your lower front rib in a direct line above the front of your pelvis.

- **SHOULDERS:** The positioning of your shoulders dictates the shape of your upper body, which subsequently dictates how well you can breathe, your balance, how much neck pain you will have, how many headaches you will suffer from and how mobile your arms can be. Getting them in the right place is essential for great alignment, posture and overall health both in and out of the saddle.

KEY ALIGNMENT PRINCIPLE: Stack your shoulders directly above your ribs, which are above your hips, which are above your heels.

- **HEAD AND NECK:** Your head is incredibly heavy, and it is designed to be supported by the bony structure of your cervical vertebrae; which are designed to be a tower and sit directly on top of each other so that they are strong. What we often see is the chin moving away from the spine which puts the vertebrae into a stepped position, making them vulnerable to damage and putting too much stress on the soft tissues. Enter headaches, neck pain and an inability to look over your shoulder.

KEY ALIGNMENT PRINCIPLE: Keep drawing your chin back towards your spine, yes, this is the time where more than one chin is a good thing.

2. Strengthening your Lower Back

Lower back pain is credited as being the biggest health problem of our time. It is responsible for more days off work than any other disease or condition and affects the quality of life for millions of people around the globe.

Your back is designed to be strong, stable and powerful. The muscles are designed to hold the vertebrae in the correct position as you move through all types of positions, absorb load and carry out the activities that make up your daily life.

The problem has been society's focus on the front of the body; the age of the 6-pack has lead the muscles of the back of the body to become stretched and weak, allowing the vertebrae to slip out of alignment, affecting the health of the spinal cord, discs and soft tissues.

Strengthening the lower back is straight forward and compulsory if you are going to live in a body that doesn't let you down the next time you want to tie your shoelace.

The best posture for lower back health looks like this:



How To

1. Stand with your feet hip width apart and rock your weight gently onto your heels
2. Soften your knees and imagine you are going to lower yourself into a chair behind you

3. Hinge forward slightly from the waist and reach your arms up in front of you, pressing your finger tips together. Keep your shoulders reaching upwards.

After a few seconds, you should feel the muscles of your lower back activate. Stay and hold this position for 30-50 seconds and repeat 3 times throughout the day.

3. Nourish Your Body

We all know the importance of good nutrition for our health, mental capacity and energy levels, but often life gets in the way and it is easier to reach for a sugary pick me up or a tasty carb loaded meal, that may be great in the moment, but doesn't give us any sustaining benefit. To help offset some of the slightly poorer choices we all inevitably make, a green smoothie each morning is an excellent way of hitting your body with essential nutrients and providing it with nourishment so you can power yourself through the day with more energy, an improved immune system, less inflammation and less desire to take on those foods that don't serve us.

Making a green smoothie doesn't have to be all Hollywood, it can be a really simple set of ingredients.

My go to smoothie is:

1 cup of spinach

1 cup of coconut water (or normal water)

Handful of berries or fruit of your choice

1/2 or 1 banana (optional)

Teaspoon of peanut butter (optional)

If you are new to the smoothie game, start with this recipe and then mix it up as you go along. Use fruits that are in season, use frozen berries, add in a vegetable or two (carrot, ginger, beetroot) and play around with what suits you. The base of spinach and water should always be there, so you get the hit of green nutrients but the rest is up to you!

TOP TIP: If you have a small blender, blend the greens and the water first, and then put the rest of the ingredients in. This makes sure you have an actual smoothie rather than a drink of lumpy greens. Yum.

